

# Towards an Understanding of What is Inconceivable

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As I reverently contemplate the True Buddha and Land, (I realize that) the Buddha is the Tathāgata of Inconceivable Light and His Land is the Land of Immeasurable Light.<sup>1</sup>

This Tathagata is also known as *Namu-fukashigikō-butsu* (namu-Buddha of inconceivable light) and is the ‘dharmakaya as compassionate means.’<sup>2</sup>

—SHINRAN

WESTERN SCHOLARS of the Buddhist tradition have been familiar, for long, with confronting the new in the Buddhist heritage; dimensions of a worldview and sources of human self-understanding that tend not to fit readily into customary frames of reference formulated, nurtured, and passed on through Western culture. These scholars have met the notion of *hōben* (方便; Skt. *upāya*) before, have even found standard English equivalents such as “provisional means” or “expedient means.” And Western scholars have had little difficulty in understanding Buddhist representatives, in the past and present, who have spoken about the efficacy of the provisional means or expedients in bringing about holistic penetration into salvific truth, enlightenment. Given the provisionality of the means and the

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the members of the Ryukoku Translation Center, Ryukoku University, and the committee members of the Shin Buddhism Translation Series, Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto, for their patient work, in translating the writings of Shinran into English, that reflects fully Shinran's commitment to share through intelligible human words a vision neither restricted by the level of one's linguistic com-

justificatory consequence of the end, namely, enlightenment, Western scholars have had little difficulty in discerning the compassionate quality of the means or expedients and the finality of and complete liberation involved in the end. And yet, one can detect a little disquiet among some Western interpreters about an apparent provisionality or penultimacy of compassion, on the one hand, and also, among some Buddhists, a disconcertedness about the way interpreters might tend to underrate the provisional, the expedient.

The issue becomes sharply focused when we turn to the Jōdo-shinshū heritage and consider Amida, who is explicitly referred to as *hōben*. If Amida be merely a provisional means, then, we might anticipate our Western interpreters to say, one would need to move through that to the ultimate reality that somehow would be sensed to "stand behind" Amida, to be more real, the true source of final enlightenment.

*Hōben*, "provisional means" or "expedient means," is an extraordinarily difficult term to handle adequately in the Jōdo-shinshū

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petence nor limited to the sphere of human experience that can be readily communicated through human speech or the written word.

After having written this article I received from Minor L. Rogers a copy of his paper, "Shin Buddhist Piety as Gratitude," delivered at a Seminar on "Acts of Thanksgiving and the Virtue of Gratitude in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam," held in Dallas, Texas, December 17-19, 1983. I am grateful for references, in that paper by Rogers, to a few passages related to the matter of *on*, that I had not noted in my own reading. I have indicated those passages in the relevant notes that follow. I also wish to thank Ann Rogers for her careful editorial review of this article and her helpful suggestions.

Yoichi Aizawa, my colleague at Colgate, assisted in checking my transliterations of the original passages.

<sup>1</sup> *Kyō Gyō Shin Shō (Ken Jōdo Shinjitsu Kyōgyōshō Monrui): The Teachings, Practice, Faith, and Enlightenment: A Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment of Pure Land Buddhism*, under the direction of Ishida Mitsuyuki, translated and annotated by Inagaki Hisao, Kosho Yukawa, Thomas R. Okano, "Ryukoku Translation Series," Volume V, Kyoto: Ryukoku Translation Center, Ryukoku University, 1983 [2nd edition of the work first published in 1966], p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> *Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling: A Translation of Shinran's Ichinen-tanen mon'i*, Ueda Yoshifumi, General Editor, "Shin Buddhism Translation Series," Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1980, p. 46.

heritage. One notes that superlative translators handle the one term, *hōben*, differently in different contexts.<sup>3</sup>

When *hōben* appears in the context of a consideration of modes of religious discipline that are based on the agency of the person (*jiriki*), a sense of expediency, provisionality, temporariness is found in the term.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, one reads,

The eighty-four thousand dharma-gates are all good practices of the provisional means of the Pure Land teaching [*jōdo no hōben*]; they are known as the Essential or Provisional Gate. (*Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling*, p. 45).

No doubt the translation of "provisional means" for *hōben* in this passage is determined by the complex of *yō mon* (要門), "Essential [gate]," and *kemon* (假門), "Provisional Gate," in the immediate context. Further, in this passage Shinran writes a marginal note: "Provisional [Gate - *ke mon*]: temporary; not true and real." (*Ibid.*, note 30, p. 45). The passage under consideration is as follows: *hachi man shi sen no hō mon wa, mina kore jōdo no hōben no zen nari. kore o yō mon to iu, kore o ke mon to nazuke nari*—and Shinran's marginal note, *kari nari makoto narazuto nari*. The passage is found in *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* [hereafter, SSZ.], Volume II, Kyoto: Oyagi Kōbundo, 1984 [of the work first published in 1941], 615.7–10). The phrase *jōdo no hōben*, taken in this translation as "the provisional means of the Pure Land teaching," provides an example of *hōben* interpreted to mean "provisional means" in the sense of a temporary expedient.

Keeping our attention on this passage, we begin to sense that the translation committee was struggling with unusually delicate theological issues. The passage continues, "This gate consists of the good practices, meditative and non-meditative, taught in the *Sutra of Meditation on Amida Buddha*." And, after briefly summarizing the meditative and non-meditative good practices, the passage continues,

These all belong to the Essential Gate, which is the provisional means of the Pure Land teaching [*kore mina jōdo hōben no yō mon nari*]; it is also called the Provisional Gate [*kore o ke mon to mo iu*]. Encouraging and guiding all sentient beings with various means [The phrase "with various means" has been added by the translators for the sake of clarity.] through this Essential or Provisional Gate [*yō mon ke mon*], the Buddha teaches and encourages them to enter 'the great treasure ocean of true and real virtue—the Primal Vow, perfect and unhindered, which is the one vehicle.' Hence, all good acts of self-power are called provisional ways [*yoruzu no jiriki no zen gō oba hōben no mon to mōsu nari*]. (*Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling*, p. 45. See SSZ., II, 615.10–12, for the original passage.)

Our key notion, *hōben*, is now met in a context with an extending cluster of important concepts including the highly significant idea of *jiriki*, "self-power," together with *yō mon* and *ke mon*.

We find *hōben* used to designate the expedient gate and the provisional gate; they are *hōben* of the Pure Land [*jōdo no hōben*]. They are provisional means of the Pure Land; they are not *makoto*, singularly genuine, directly authentic means of attaining the Pure Land.<sup>4</sup> They are put into contrast with the basis of true and real piety or virtue (*shinji-tsu kudoku*)—the Primal Vow.

We meet our term *hōben* in still another context. A “nembutsu-being” (*nembutsu shujō*), we are told in *Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling*, is a person “who has realized diamondlike shinjin [*kongō no shinjin o etaru hito nari*].”<sup>5</sup> A few lines further we read that this great notion of *shinjin* is considered *hōben*; and the phrase enters into English as “through the compassionate means of shinjin [*shinjin no hōben*].”<sup>6</sup> Our translators have chosen another phrase for *hōben* in this context. Rather than “provisional means” and the like, one reads “compassionate means.” In checking the “Glossary” to *Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling*, the text presently being considered, one does not find an entry under “Provisional” or “Expedient” or *hōben* (although other transliterated terms appear). One does find “Compassionate means (*hōben* 方便)”<sup>7</sup> and infers that although *hōben* might have differing meanings or nuances, as faithfully noted in the glossary entry, the idea of “compassionate means” is the primary meaning that needs to be communicated in order for an English reader to begin to discern the Jōdo-shinshū heritage as those within it have come to see it.

We have found how modes of the religious life following alternative practices perceived to be “self-power” have been considered the result of *hōben*, how the arising of *shinjin* also is by means of *hōben*,<sup>8</sup> how, too, by means of *hōben* one comes really to hear the Vow.<sup>9</sup>

Amida as *dharmakaya* in form is also *hōben*. T’an-luan (J. Donran)

<sup>4</sup> One is not sure whether Shinran’s marginal note, explicitly written on *ke mon*, is to be interpreted as applying also to *yō mon*.

<sup>5</sup> *Notes on Once-calling*, p. 36; SSZ., II, 608.4–5.

<sup>6</sup> *Notes on Once-calling*, p. 37; SSZ., II, 608.5.

<sup>7</sup> *Notes on Once-calling*, p. 63. See also the entry, “Essential Gate and Provisional Gate (*yōmon* 要門. *kemon* 假門),” *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> For example, one notes *Letters*, letter #2, p. 25; SSZ., II, 660.9, “You should know that this shinjin is bestowed through the compassionate means [*on-hōben*] of Sakyamuni, Amida, and all the Buddhas in the [ten] quarters.” Shinran also writes,

introduced the intrinsic and integral twofold dimension of *dharma-makāya*. He wrote,

‘Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have two kinds of Dharma Bodies: firstly, the Dharma Body of Dharma-nature [*hosshō hosshin*], and, secondly, the Dharma Body of Expediency. Depending on the Dharma Body of Dharma-nature, the Dharma Body of Expediency arises; depending on the Dharma Body of Expediency [*hōben hosshin*], the Dharma Body of Dharma-nature reveals itself. These two Dharma Bodies are distinct but not separate, one but not identical.’<sup>10</sup>

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Sakyamuni and Amida [*shaka nyorai mida butsu*] are our parents of great compassion; using many and various compassionate means [*hōben*], they awaken the supreme shinjin [*mujō no shinjin*]. Thus the settling of true shinjin [*makoto no shinjin*] is the working [*on-hakara*] of Sakyamuni and Amida.

*Letters*, letter #13, p. 42; SSZ., II, 673.14–674.2. Shinran mentions Shan-tao’s *Hymn of Meditation on the Presence of the Buddha* in making this observation. In *The Koso Wasan: The Hymns on the Patriarchs*, “Ryukoku Translation Series,” Kyoto: Ryukoku Translation Center, Ryukoku University, 1974, *wasan* #74, p. 99, Shinran writes,

Śākya and Amida are Compassion’s parents;  
Using all means they skillfully [*hōben*] lead us  
And in us the supreme Faith [*mujō no shinjin*]  
Do they awaken.

At this place, page 99, the Ryukoku Translation Center provides, in footnote 1, the passage by Shan-tao (J. Zendō), wherein both *hōben* and *shinjin* appear. This passage is translated, by the RTC staff,

Tathāgata Śākyamuni is truly the parent of Compassion.  
Through various skillful means [*hōben*],  
He awakens the highest Faith in us.

<sup>9</sup> And further, Shinran writes,

There was a time for each of you when you knew nothing of Amida’s Vow and did not say the Name of Amida Buddha, but now, guided by the compassionate means [*hōben*] of Sakyamuni and Amida, you have begun to hear the Vow.

*Letters*, letter #20, p. 60; SSZ., II, 690.8–9.

<sup>10</sup> Note 24 in “Supplementary Notes,” *The Tanni Shō: Notes Lamenting Differences*, “Ryukoku Translation Series,” Volume II, Kyoto: Ryukoku Translation Center, Ryukoku University, fourth edition, 1980 (of the work first published in 1962), p. 101.

Shinran maintains the notion of the three bodies of the Buddha, which he received through the heritage of his tradition,<sup>11</sup> and, at the same time, he stands fully in the wake of T'an-luan in holding to the discernible distinctions yet indivisibility of *dharmakāya* (*hosshin*).<sup>12</sup> Shinran turns full face to the issue we are considering:

'Compassionate means [*hōben*]' refers to manifesting form [*katachi*], revealing a name, and making itself known to sentient beings. It refers to Amida Buddha. This Tathagata is light. Light is none other than wisdom; wisdom is the form of light [*chie wa hikari no katachi nari*]. Wisdom is, in addition, formless [*chie mata katachi nakereba*]; hence this Tathagata is the Buddha of inconceivable light [*fukashigikō butsu*].<sup>13</sup>

*Hōben* refers to a great deal: to paths and practices, to *jiriki*, "self-power", to *tariki*, "other-power", in so far as *shinjin* arises through *hōben*, to form, to the Name, which is also the Primal Vow,<sup>14</sup> and to a distinctive yet fundamentally inseparable dimension of *dharmakāya* itself.

And *hōben* involves something else—sentient beings. *Hōben* also is

<sup>11</sup> The three bodies are: first, the dharma-body [*hosshin*]; second, the fulfilled body [*hōjin*]; third, the personified body [*ōjin*]. The present 'Amida Tathagata' is a Tathagata of fulfilled body [*ima kono mida nyorai wa hōjin nyorai nari*].

*Letters*, letter #8, p. 35; SSZ., II, 668.8.

<sup>12</sup> From this treasure ocean of oneness form [*katachi*] was manifested, taking the name of Bodhisattva Dharmakara, who, through establishing the unhindered Vow as the cause, became Amida Buddha. For this reason Amida is the 'Tathagata of Fulfilled body [*hōjin nyorai*].' He has been called 'Buddha of unhindered light filling the ten quarters.' This Tathagata is also known as *Namu-fukashigikō-butsu* (namu-Buddha of inconceivable light) and is the 'dharmakaya as compassionate means [*hōben hosshin*].'

*Notes on Once-calling.*, p. 46; SSZ., II, 616.3-7.

<sup>13</sup> *Notes on Once-calling.*, p. 46; SSZ., II, 616.7-10.

<sup>14</sup> Shinran provides a gloss on the passage quoted above in note 3, from *Notes on Once-calling*, p. 45. For "the great treasure ocean of true and real virtue—the Primal Vow, perfect and unhindered, which is the one vehicle," he notes, "'Unhindered' means that it cannot be obstructed or destroyed by blind passion and karmic evil. 'True and real virtue' is the Name. Since the wondrous principle of true reality or suchness has reached its perfection in the Primal Vow, this Vow is likened to a great treasure ocean." (*Ibid.*, p. 46. See SSZ., II, 615.14-616.1.)

fundamentally relational; it provides the point of contact between the human mind or heart (心: *shin/kokoro*) and salvific truth. We come to see in the thought of Shinran that the cosmos is focused on the heart (*shin/kokoro*) that can be enabled to manifest the sincere, serene joy (*shingyō*) of salvific truth, which inherently and inescapably avails itself to human discernment.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas the translation committee which has given us the Ryukoku Translation Series<sup>16</sup> has tended toward uniformity in translating *hōben* in all contexts as “provisional means” or “expedient means,” the committee responsible for the “Shin Buddhism Translation Series”<sup>17</sup> has preferred to provide a distinction in English between “provisional

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<sup>15</sup> In a very important passage, Shinran demonstrates the soteriological involvement of *hōben* and life in its broadest sense.

Nirvana is called. . . true reality, dharmakaya, dharma-nature, suchness, oneness, and Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is none other than Tathagata. This Tathagata pervades the countless worlds; it *fills the hearts and minds (shin/kokoro)* [emphasis mine] of the ocean of all beings. Thus, plants, trees, and land all attain Buddhahood.

Since it is *with this heart and mind (shin/kokoro)* of all sentient beings that they *entrust themselves* to the Vow of the dharmakaya-as-compassion [*hōben hosshin no seigan o shingyōzuru*], *this shinjin* is none other than Buddha-nature [*kono shinjin sunawachi busshō nari*]. This Buddha-nature is dharma-nature. Dharma-nature is the dharmakaya. *For this reason* there are two kinds of dharmakaya in regard to the Buddha. The first is called dharmakaya-as-suchness [*hosshō hosshin*] and the second, dharmakaya-as-compassion [*hōben hosshin*]. Dharmakaya-as-suchness has neither color nor form; thus, the mind [*kokoro*] cannot grasp it nor words describe it. From this oneness was manifested form [*katashi*], called dharmakaya-as-compassion [*hōben hosshin*]. Taking this form, the Buddha proclaimed his name as Bhikṣu Dharmākara and established the forty-eight great Vows that surpass conceptual understanding [emphases mine].

*Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone': A Translation of Shinran's Yuishinshō-mon'i*, Ueda Yoshifumi, General Editor, “Shin Buddhism Translation Series,” Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1979, p. 42–43; SSZ., II, 630.1–15.

<sup>16</sup> As indicated in previous notations, this series is produced by the Ryukoku Translation Center of Ryukoku University, Kyoto.

<sup>17</sup> As also indicated in the notes, above, this committee goes about its work at the Hongwanji International Center in Kyoto. This translation program is sponsored by Nishi-Hongwanji in Kyoto. Incidentally, Nishi-Hongwanji is the founding institution of Ryukoku University, founded in 1636.

means" and "compassionate means," letting the former refer to alternative orientations and the latter to Jōdo-shinshū.

Although one might well make the point that in every case where *hōben* is met one is to understand it as meaning "compassionate means," one, nevertheless, discerns, on the part of the committee providing the "Shin Buddhism Translation Series," an attempt to "do something" with *hōben* when bringing it into the English medium in the context of the translations. Colleagues working to produce the "Ryukoku Translation Series" are aware of delicate dimensions in the notion of *hōben*; are aware, too, of a stumbling-block *hōben* has tended to be for Western scholars of the Buddhist heritage in Japan as they turn their attention to Jōdo-shinshū.<sup>18</sup>

There have been numerous Western scholars who have contributed significantly to our knowledge of the Buddhist heritage of Japan. The majority of these scholars have not focused their attention on the most popular form of expression of that heritage, namely, Jōdo-shinshū. Even today, generally speaking, and with only slight overstatement, Americans are given pause upon learning that not all Buddhists in Japan are Zen Buddhists, are surprised to find that Zen does not represent the most popular form of expression of the Buddhist heritage in Japan.

In a consideration of Zen, Westerners tend to meet *hōben* with twin assumptions: the fundamental value of "being"/*ovtos* (ontology), and the soteriological convergence of "being" and the purposeful end, *telos* (teleology). There has been an admirable ability among Western scholars to become self-conscious about these assumptions in a serious commitment to understand. And one notes the remarkable preparedness among them to let the value commitment to "being" fall away, in an attempt to understand, before the notion of *śūnyatā*, which transcends both being and non-being. But we have not witnessed this development before *hōben* in considerations of the Jōdo-shinshū heritage; if it is *hōben* it is not real nor is it final—it is merely expedient, temporary, provisional.

Upon turning to the Jōdo-shinshū heritage, a Western interpreter might think that one is expected to "move through" *hōben*, that is, to

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<sup>18</sup> I should note that some colleagues serve on both committees, a sterling opportunity that was mine during a sabbatical year, 1985–1986.



move beyond the numerous practices endorsed by other strands of the Buddhist heritage in Japan, and also to move beyond the Name, the Vow, the means of the arising of *shinjin*, Dharmakara, Amida, beyond all of the elaborate schemes, to arrive at, attain, finally, the fundamental reality of *dharmakāya*-as-suchness, ultimate *dharmakāya*—a kind of Zen for the ordinary person living “in the meantime.” But such interpretation would miss a lively dynamic expressed in the writings of Shinran and averred by sensitive men and women by means of, and as a consequence of, their engaged participation in the continuing Jōdo-shinshū tradition.

## II

How can one set about to uncover this dynamic that springs from a deep realization that within *hōben* one has found both the means of “self-power” (*jiriki*) and also the means of “other-power” (*tariki*), that *hōben* is authentically known when it is discerned as “other-power,” an “other-power” that is discovered to have become present in one’s life with a thoroughgoing, all-pervasive assurance that is grounded on the soteriological realizability of the fundamental order of reality—that this order of reality can be realized and, consequently, anticipated and, simultaneously, known, in the personal recesses of one’s life, to be absolutely supportive (*jinen hōni*)?

One recalls the insight of T’an-luan (J. Donran), previously mentioned, of the intrinsic and integral dimensions of *dharmakāya*: *dharmakāya*-as-suchness and *dharmakāya*-as-compassion. One recalls, also, that Shinran confirmed this insight of his heritage; he saw the point of it and appropriated it. He also appropriated the profoundly subtle differentiation provided by the concepts “self-power” (*jiriki*) and “other-power” (*tariki*). The indirect, below-the-surface, devious and difficult to discern operation of human calculation (*hakarai*) continues in human acts with devastating subtlety. The only way open to men and women is the calculation, designing (*on-hakarai*) of Śākyamuni and Amida.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The old misunderstanding that one finds in Buddhist texts, representing a perspective of what has come to be called the Mahāyāna, that the way of the Arahant is somehow to be interpreted as “selfish” can hardly be applied to the insight shared by

We begin to nudge an interpretation of *hōben* that enables one to understand it to be just as real as the awareness of one's *hakarai*, for the *on-hakarai* that enables one to become free of one's own *hakarai* must be at least as real in its soteriological efficacy as one's own *hakarai* is in detrimental futility. Shinran was fully aware of the inadequacy of thinking that one must somehow go beyond Amida to fundamental reality, to penetrate behind Amida to ultimate realization of *dharma-makāya*, because this way of thinking suggests that one must *do* something, assuming, of course that one *can* do something. If one relinquishes the absolute necessity of "other-power" (*tariki*), "self power"/"calculation" (*jiriki/hakarai*) will arise with its characteristically persistent tendency toward distortion, especially in a life-setting that is found to be awry (*mappō*). It is recorded that Shinran said,

"As for *jinen*, *ji* means 'of itself'—it is not through the practitioner's calculation [*hakarai*]; one is made to become so. *Nen* means 'one is made to become so'—it is not through the practitioner's calculation [*hakarai*]; it is through the working of the Vow of Tathagata [*nyorai no chikai*]. As for *hōni*, it means 'one is made to become so through the working of the Vow of Tathagata [*nyorai no on-chikai*].' *Hōni* means that one is made to become so (*ni*) by virtue of this dharma (*hō*) [*kono hō no toku*], being the working of the Vow where there is no calculation [*hakarai*] on the part of the practitioner. In short, there is no place at all for the practitioner's calculation [*hakarai*]. We are taught, therefore, that in Other Power no selfworking is true working [*kono yueni gi naki o gi tosutoshiru beshito nari*].

"*Jinen* means that from the very beginning one is made to become so. Amida's Vow [*mida butsu no on-chikai*] is, from the very beginning, designed to have each person entrust himself [*tanomase*] in namu-amida-butsu and be received in the Buddha Land; none of this is through the practitioner's calculation [*hakarai*]. Thus there is no room for him to be concerned with his being good or bad. This is the meaning of *jinen* as I have learned it.

"This Vow [*chikai*] is the Vow to make us all attain the supreme Buddhahood. The supreme Buddha is formless, and because of being

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Shinran: "other-power" is radically dissociated from "self-power"—there is not to be found the slightest trace of *hakarai* in the person who has realized *shinjin*. And the absence of *hakarai* would be a quality attributable to an Arhant, one should think.

formless is called *jinen*. When this Buddha is shown as being with form [*katachi*], it is not called the supreme nirvana (Buddha). In order to make us realize that the true Buddha is formless, it is expressly called Amida Buddha; so I have been taught. Amida Buddha is the medium [*ryō*] through which we are made to realize *jinen*. After we have realized that this is the way it is, we should not be forever talking about *jinen*. If one always talks about *jinen*, then the truth that Other Power is<sup>20</sup> no selfworking will again become a problem of selfworking. This is the mystery of the wisdom of Buddhas [*bucchi no fushigi*].”<sup>21</sup>

It appears that *jinen-hōni* represents the salvific stability of reality, the natural *and* normative, pre-existent, underlying truth. The selfworking (*gi*: in the Ryukoku Translation Series this word is taken as “reasoning”) of a person who has entered the way—that is, attempting to determine what is proper to be done with a sense of self-agency in religious discipline, involving, regularly, one’s own “counting up” or “measuring” (*hakarai*) the desired benefits from the proper observance of a rite considered to be proper in a customarily given situation—is to be offset by being set aside through the agency of “other-power.” Assuredly, this passage indicates, there is to be no calculation on the part of the practitioner.

An extraordinarily delicate passage is found in this extended quotation. In the third paragraph two ways of referring to the supreme Buddha are mentioned: it is called *jinen* because it is formless. At the same time one reads that in order that one might realize this, “it is expressly called Amida Buddha.” And one notes that Amida is considered to be form (*katachi*).

Further, there is the crucial point that “Amida Buddha is the

<sup>20</sup> The translators have added the phrase “the truth that Other Power is” for the sake of clarity.

<sup>21</sup> *Letters of Shinran*, letter #5, pp. 29–30. The editor/translators mention in the introductory note, p. 29, “‘On Jinen-hōni’ is a direct record of Shinran’s words made by Kenchi in 1258.” The passage is at SSZ., II, 663.6–664.8.

Another translation of this extended passage, “On Jinen-hōni,” is found in *Shōzōmatsu Wasan: Shinran’s Hymns on the Last Age*, translated and annotated in The Ryukoku University Translation Center, “Ryukoku Translation Series,” Vol. VII, Kyoto: Ryukoku University Press, 1980, pp. 115–117. This translation is based on the “Bunmei (1466–1487) text which Rennyo included in the *Sanjō Wasan*,” *ibid.*, note 1, p. 114. See SSZ., II, 530–531.

medium [*ryō*: in the RTS, this word is taken as “source”] through which we are made to realize *jinen*.” We would miss the force of the term *ryō*, here translated as “medium,” if we take it to mean merely “means by which” or with a spatial sense of something standing in the “middle,” between humankind, on the one hand, and fundamental formless reality that stands beyond or behind the “middle/medium.” The force of *ryō* seems to be that it is precisely the context *in which jinen*, i.e., the formless supreme Buddha, is to be realized. *Ryō* is the surrounding and pervading environment in which one realizes *jinen*. There, in the midst of form one is met by the formless, at the moment of the complete demise of one’s calculation (*hakarai*) one realizes *jinen*.

Take away Amida and one is met with the need for self-exertion, self-working, self-power, it is averred. Interpret Amida as intermediate and one is met with the problem of what is the proper way to interpret or to understand Amida in order to realize the ultimate of which Amida is seen to be the penultimate. A comment like “Amida is all that we have to be concerned about” tends to make sense.

### III

But there is another dimension of the Jōdo-shinshū heritage to which one might turn to see more clearly an enhanced and real dynamic that Jōdo-shinshū Buddhists have tended to discover in the notion of *hōben*. *Hōben* is relational, we have mentioned. The “reality quotient” of *hōben* is not only rooted in essence, as an inseparable dimension of *dharmakāya*, as doctrinally stated, but in the existential reality of human life in space and time. *Hōben*, it appears, is as real as Shinran’s own understanding of his own life.

We turn to consider briefly a term that is also relational, a weighty and important term in understanding the interpretations of persons who have seen the point of the Jōdo-shinshū heritage—the term is *on* (恩). *On* can mean “benevolence,” “kindness,” “generosity,” “a favor,” “goodness,” and the like. But these qualities do not exist “out there,” as it were, apart from persons. There must be a recipient of benevolence or kindness. The use of the term *on* not only communicates this relational reality but also heightens it. *On* indicates a participatory engagement in the benevolent act or act of kindness. To

refer to the Buddha's benevolence (*on*) means not merely that by definition the Buddha is benevolent but that one has for oneself realized in the center of one's self-understanding the reality of the relationship in which the quality of *on* has become known—not provisionally, not expediently, but personally.

*On* is simultaneously a gracious and efficacious act expressed from one heart in a relationship and an act that affects the heart of another participating in this relationship. In a sense *on* is the causal activity that links hearts and minds. It is an expression from a heart that is moved, an expression that moves the heart of another. *On*, ideally, is affirmed by the recipient; were this not so, *on* would be merely a cultural norm that, like other cultural norms, could be manipulated by less scrupulous, certainly less caring, persons.

*On* also is akin to "gratitude," a sense of obligation, a duty that is not discerned as being placed upon one from "outside," from something called "society," but a duty recognized by oneself, for oneself, for which one is deeply grateful. "Knowing what has been done" by another or others for oneself (Sanskrit, *kṛtajña*; Pali, *katāññu*—Buddhists have been familiar with this for long), would tend to persuade a reflective person to understand that there is no "self-made man" or "self-made woman."

*On* means, then, "benevolence" and "gratitude." And, within the Jōdo-shinshū heritage, this great notion provides a creative edge that cuts away any theoretical projection that *dharmakāya*-as-compassion (*hōben hosshin*) is merely a provisional means or expedient means while it also undercuts a sense of estrangement.

A glance at definitions provided in glossaries makes us alert that we are on to a weighty subject: for *on* we find "beneficial act or service, grace,"<sup>22</sup> and under the entry *button*, we find "Buddha's Benevolence, indebtedness to Buddha."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *The Shōshin Ge: The Gāthā of True Faith in the Nembutsu*, translated and annotated under the direction of Fugen Daien, "Ryukoku Translation Series," Volume I, Kyoto: Ryukoku Translation Center, Ryukoku University, 1984 [5th edition of the work first published in 1961], p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> *The Jōdo Wasan: The Hymns of the Pure Land*, translated and annotated by Fujimoto Ryukyo, Inagaki Hisao, Leslie S. Kawamura, "Ryukoku Translation Series," Volume IV, Kyoto: Ryukoku Translation Center, Ryukoku University, 1984 [2nd edition of the work first published in 1965], p. 169.

## TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING

Turning to some of the writings of Shinran, one finds that *on* provides a context in which he understands himself to be: within a shared human experience with great Buddhist figures who preceded him<sup>24</sup> and within a relationship with Śākyamuni and Amida, more particularly Amida.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> He writes of Nāgārjuna, "We should express our gratitude for the Great Compassionate Vow [*daihi guzei no on o hōzu beshi*]. (Thus Nāgārjuna said.)" *Shōshin Ge*, RTS., p. 30. Shinran sees himself standing with Vasubandhu when he writes, of himself, "Hereupon, acknowledging the (Buddha's) benevolence and wishing to repay it [*chion hōtoku*], I open a master's commentary [T'an-luan's (J. Donran's) *Ojō Ron Chū*, commenting on the received text of the *Jōdo Ron* by Vasubandhu]. . . ." *Kyō Gyō Shin Shō*, p. 80. See also note 1 on p. 80. And of Vasubandhu, he writes, "Now he acknowledges the (Buddha's) benevolence and wishes to repay it [*on o shitte toku o hōzu*]." *Ibid.* Shinran demonstrates his awareness of Shan-tao's [J. Zendō's] orientation by quoting the Chinese master; "These people do not feel grateful for the Buddha's Benevolence [*kano button o nempō suru koto nashi*]." *Ibid.*, p. 195.

Shinran also demonstrates his sense of the presence of *on* undergirding his self-understanding within the heritage of the masters. He expresses this with regard to Hōnen, but also, indirectly, to the great masters who participated in the tradition; "I deeply acknowledge the Tathāgata's Compassion and sincerely appreciate the master's benevolence in instructing me [*makotoni shikyō no onkō o aogu*]." *Ibid.*, p. 211. At note 4, this page, it is mentioned that the comment by Shinran "refers particularly to Hōnen, but it also refers to the other Patriarchs." And, again regarding Hōnen, and indirectly Shan-tao, Shinran comments on a phrase written by Seikaku, another disciple of Hōnen: "'Reflecting on the master's teaching, it is one with Amida's compassionate Vow.' We should realize, then, the vast and profound benevolence [*oshie on*] of the great master's teaching." *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls: A Translation of Shinran's Songō shinzō meimon*, Ueda Yoshifumi, General Editor, "Shin Buddhism Translation Series," Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1981, p. 68; SSZ., II, 599.14.

<sup>25</sup> Further, one finds consistency in Shinran's sense of contextuality within the *on*-relationship with Śākyamuni, with Amida, and with the masters, by noting Shinran's motivation for writing. One reads,

Reverently entrusting myself to the teaching, practice, and realization that are the true essence of the Pure Land way, I am especially aware of the profundity of the Tathagata's benevolence [*kotoni nyorai no ondoku fukaki koto o shinnu*]. Here I rejoice in what I have heard and extol what I have attained.

*The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way: A Translation of Shinran's Kyōgyōshinshō*, Volume I, Ueda Yoshifumi, General Editor, "Shin Buddhism Translation Series," Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1983, p. 59. This passage also occurs at *Kyō Gyō Shin Shō*, RTS., p. 26. See SSZ., II, 1.10-11. The RTS translation, *loc. cit.*, provides an extended note:

Shinran, in anticipation of the possibility that readers, who had not realized the insight attained by him, would ridicule or perhaps do worse to him, writes, "Mindful solely of the depth and vastness of the Buddha's benevolence [*button*], I am unconcerned about being personally abused."<sup>26</sup> Further, Shinran says,

Now that I have entered the Sea of the Vow once and for all, I deeply acknowledge the Buddha's Benevolence [*fukaku button o shireri*]. In order to repay my indebtedness to His Utmost Virtue [*shitoku o hōsha sen tame ni*], I have gleaned the essential passages of the True Teaching and always utter with recollection the Sea of the Inconceivable Virtue.<sup>27</sup>

And elsewhere he writes, "And knowing keenly that the Buddha's

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Ondoku 恩徳: Lit. 'virtue of benevolence'; also simply 'on' 恩. Originally, it is one of the three virtues of Buddhahood, the other two being 'chitoku' 知徳, 'virtue of wisdom', and 'dantoku' 斷徳, 'virtue of destroying (defilements and ignorance)'; benevolence is a Buddha's intrinsic virtue out of which He has compassion for all sentient beings, makes a vow to save them, and actively engages in delivering them from Samsāra. In broader usage, the term is applied to any kind action done to or for one by another person; particularly, a Buddha's or a teacher's kind instructions and painstaking efforts in enlightening us are referred to. Sanskrit equivalents are 'upakara', 'upakarana', 'krita', and 'sukrita', meaning 'service done', 'kind action', and 'benefit'.

Again one reads,

Thus, taking refuge in the true words of the Great Sage and turning to the commentaries of the revered patriarchs, I realize the depth and vastness of the Buddha's benevolence [*button*] and compose the following hymn [Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu].

*The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, p. 160. The passage also appears at *The Kyō Gyō Shin Shō*, RTS., p. 81. See SSZ., II, 43.7.

<sup>26</sup> *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way: A Translation of Shinran's Kyōgyōshinshō*, Volume II, Ueda Yoshifumi, General Editor, "Shin Buddhism Translation Series," Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1985, p. 202. SSZ., II, 47.5. See also *Kyō Gyō Shin Shō*, RTS., p. 85. This general orientation appears again when Shinran writes, "Hereupon, I have collected the essentials of the True Teaching, and have gleaned the important passages of Pure Land Buddhism [*Jōdo no*]. I only think of the Buddha's deep Benevolence [*itada button no fukaki koto o nenji te*], and do not care about people's abuse." *Kyō Gyō Shin Shō*, RTS., p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> *Kyō Gyō Shin Shō*, RTS., p. 198.

benevolence [*button*] is difficult to fathom, I seek to clarify it through this collection of passages on the Pure Land way."<sup>28</sup>

One sees clearly that Shinran interpreted his literary activity, his unusual patience in collecting and recording passages, character by character, his glosses, his painstaking efforts to assure that texts were intelligible to a wide reading public, as the kind of act a person does upon recognizing an *on*-relationship with Amida, with Śakyamuni, with the great masters of the past, including, of course, Hōnen.

In short, Shinran shares his fundamental orientation to his own life and ministry, and he offers a glimpse of the point on which he was enabled to stand: "Reverently embracing the Tathagata's teaching, respond in gratitude to his benevolence [*on o hōji toku o sha seiyo*] and be thankful for his compassion."<sup>29</sup>

*On* is a relationship in which Shinran participated. And this relationship was one of great existential significance; a real relationship within which one's life takes on fundamental meaning—within this relationship one can conceive of one's life in no other way. We read,

The Buddhas' protection and testimony  
Are due to the accomplishment of the Compassionate Vow;  
Those who have attained Adamantine Mind  
Should try to repay Amida's Great Benevolence [*mida no daion hōzu beshi*].<sup>30</sup>

As it is with this "Adamantine Mind" or "diamond-like mind" (*kongō shin*), so it is with those who attain, in truth, sincere serenity (*shingyō*); "They desire to return in gratitude the Buddha's benevolence [*button hōzuru omoi ari*]."<sup>31</sup> And one reads,

Only by entering the transcendent wisdom of faith,  
Can we become one who returns in gratitude the Buddha's  
benevolence.

<sup>28</sup> *Passages on the Pure Land Way: A Translation of Shinran's Jōdo monrui jushō*, Ueda Yoshifumi, General Editor, "Shin Buddhism Translation Series," Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1982, p. 29. SSZ., II, 443.5-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. SSZ., II, 443.4-5.

<sup>30</sup> *Jōdo wasan*, RTS., *wasan* #85, p. 117.

<sup>31</sup> *Shōzōmatsu Wasan: Shinran's Hymns on the Last Age*, p. 30; SSZ., II, 519.5c-10c. See Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 11.



*Shinjin no chie ni iri te koso*  
*Button hōzuru mi to wa nare*<sup>12</sup>

In the final analysis, the realization of a soteriological transformation that terminates the human experience of recurrent coursing through *samsāra* and simultaneously causes to arise an assurance of birth in the Pure Land, by enabling one to see wherein the limits of this world fall, and also simultaneously brings about an ability to move beyond the limits of inadequately self-imposed egocentrism in the quest to relieve the suffering of sentient beings—this realization and the concomitant assurance of “attaining the supreme *nirvāna*,” one finds,

Is due to the Tathagata’s twofold merit-transference [*ekō*].  
 Realizing gratitude for such benevolence [*ondoku*] is truly impossible.<sup>13</sup>

And yet one is not left without recourse, not isolated from a form for expressing this gratitude, privately and communally. It is in saying the name that one moves into the form suitable for expressing this gratitude. But this realization is more than merely saying the name, or pronouncing it or uttering it; translators are casting around for a suitable English term (or for any term in human speech) to catch and to communicate this elusive yet riveting realization. It is hearing the name, really hearing the name in the moment of creative passivity, poised with creative receptivity, when the name is truly heard on one’s human lips. It seems that the name becomes heard without the “namer,” the name is pronounced without the “pronouncer.”

Part of the power of “other-power” (*tariki*) is that it informs one of “self-power” (*jiriki*), defines “self-power” in the classic sense of *define*, “to limit,” “to set a limit to.” It is tempting to say that both “other-power” and “self-power” must somehow be transcended, that they are held in mutual negation. This may be so, but one wonders whether this way of considering the point is formulaic, is a whit too neat, might suggest something that one can get one’s mind on, so to

<sup>12</sup> *Shōzōmatsu Wasan: Shinran’s Hymns on the Last Age*, p. 34. SSZ., II, 521.11a–12a. In the immediately following *wasan* (#35), one reads that “Without the transcendent wisdom of faith [*shinjin no chie*], How could we ever realize nirvana [*ikade ka nehan o satora mashi*]?” *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49. SSZ., II, 521.11c–12c.

speak, might indicate *hakarai*. It appears that one might say without “other-power” there is no “self-power,” but it would be awry to claim that without “self-power” there is no “other-power.” It appears that the point is “without self-power,” *there, right there*, is “other-power.” And a life without this particular kind of “self-power” is a life lived with gratitude abounding.<sup>34</sup>

One cannot reach the depths of the Buddha’s benevolence, or measure it, or calculate an appropriate response, or determine precisely what one must do to repay this benevolence. There is no grateful response, worthy of the name, to this benevolence if the response is associated with one’s own volition. Although willing a grateful heart into existence is impressive, it is, nevertheless, inadequate.<sup>35</sup>

Indicating that a life lived within the Buddha’s compassion expressed in the nineteenth and twentieth vows is a life supported by the “depth of the Buddha’s benevolence [*button fukakini*],” Shinran concludes, “Thus the depth of the Buddha’s benevolence is without bound.” He continues, immediately, to say,

But how much more should we realize the benevolence of the Buddha with birth into the true and real land and attainment of the enlightenment of the supreme nirvana [*shinjitsu no hōdo e ōjōshite dainehan no satori*].<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Thus, a lifetime of saying the nembutsu with the thought, ‘If it were not for this compassionate Vow, how could such wretched evildoers as ourselves gain emancipation from birth-and-death?’ is to be recognized as entirely an expression of gratitude for the benevolence of Amida’s great compassion [*nyorai daihi no on*], of thankfulness for the Buddha’s virtuous working.

*Tannishō: A Primer - A record of the words of Shinran set down in lamentation over departures from his teaching*, translated by Dennis Hirota, Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 1982, p. 36. See also the section entitled “Text” of this volume, 14.6 on p. 102; also SSZ., II, 785.12–14. See also Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Because one doubts the inconceivable Buddha-wisdom  
And prefers to pronounce the *nembutsu* through self-power,  
One stops in the border land, the realm of sloth and complacency:  
There is no gratitude for Buddha’s benevolence [*button hōzuru kokoro nashi*].

*Shōzōmatsu Wasan: Shinran’s Hymns on the Last Age*, p. 61. SSZ., p. 523.1b–4b. See also Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> *Letters*, letter #2, p. 25. SSZ., II, 660.15–661.1. A note is provided in the English

The *on*-relationship of which Shinran spoke, the realization of what others have done for him, the orientation to all that he found worthy of cherishing, seems to lie more deeply than the customary English word “gratitude” suggests—his life, as he came to see it, was given birth, his future was given purpose because of Amida’s and Śākyamuni’s *on*, because of the *on* of the great lights of his heritage. How is one to measure the *on* of the Buddha? One cannot, of course; at our wits best such measuring remains our measuring (*hakarai*). Shinran seems to have provided a mode for appraising one’s *on*-relationship with Amida. In glossing a passage written by Seikaku, Shinran indicated the pervasive reorientation of life in recognizing the *on* of one’s teacher who leads one to see how salvific truth has been made available within one. The passage reads,

We should realize, then, the vast and profound benevolence [*oshie no on*] of the great master’s teaching. *Even by grinding your bones, then, should you repay it; even by crushing your body should it be returned:* Realizing the vastness of the benevolence of the great master’s teaching, you should repay it [*oshie no ondoku*], even if you grind your bones to dust; return it [*ondoku*], even if you crush your body to nothing. Carefully study this teaching of Master Seikaku.<sup>37</sup>

In a more comprehensive perspective, Shinran penned, with profound human insight, the following *wasan*:

The benevolence of the Tathāgata’s great compassion [*nyorai daihi no ondoku*],  
Even if we must crush our bodies, should be returned in gratitude.  
The benevolence of the masters and teachers,  
Even if we must break our bones, should be returned in gratitude.<sup>38</sup>

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translation of *Letters*, p. 25: “It is said that this letter was copied from Shinran Shōnin’s own draft, found among the remains of the venerable Shōshin-bō and circulated among the followers.”

<sup>37</sup> *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls*, p. 68. SSZ., II, 599.14–600.2.

<sup>38</sup> *Shōzōmatsu Wasan: Shinran’s Hymns on the Last Age*, p. 59. SSZ., II, 523. 1a–4a.

If *on* means benevolence, it is the benevolence that is received in the "marrow of one's bones." If *on* is gratitude, it is the inestimable gratitude before which the value of one's own life itself pales.

If one's relationship with one's teacher in space and time is a marker of a real experience, carrying a "reality quotient" that is real, then even though Amida might be interpreted to be *hōben*, this Amida, and the ensuing *on*-relationship discerned by one who recognizes it, is as real as anything that can be conceived. And the reality so conceived—conceived this way—is not dissociated from fundamental and final reality. The *dharmakāya*-as-suchness is beyond comprehension, is inconceivable. This *dharmakāya*-as-compassionate-means (*hōben*) is conceivable, falls within form and discernment.

Is *hōben* real or is it only provisional or temporary? It is as real as one's sense of *on*. In so far as *hōben* can engender a sense of *on*, one can conclude that this *hōben* is as real in one's life as one's own awareness of oneself.

Whereas T'an-luan's insight into the intrinsic and integral quality of the *dharmakāya*, as being singular and yet of two dimensions, was a doctrinal formulation of the reality of *hōben*, we find in Shinran an elaboration that leads one to conclude that understanding *hōben* as anything less than reality would involve, on the one hand, an inadequate understanding of the pervasiveness of one's *hakarai* and, on the other hand, the comprehensiveness of one's sense of *on*. Certainly it would be an inadequate understanding for one who seeks to understand Shinran.

An engaging dynamic is generated in the very act of one's discerning *on*. One can certainly recognize benevolence, and one can be grateful, but search as one might (*hakarai*) there is no duty to which one can adequately give expression, nothing that can be done by one fully to meet the obligation, no act that would be considered appropriate, either so considered by oneself or by others, no rite that customarily would be considered proper; in short, there is no selfworking or reasoning (*gi*)—only a response of being deeply, authentically, honestly grateful.

This *hōben-on* complex is at the heart of the soteriological process for men and women in the Jōdo-shinshū heritage. Moving into relation with this complex, that is, discerning that it is alluring, one gives expression of one's faith and participates in a religious heritage of impressive magnitude. Discovering this complex to be real, essentially and existen-

tially, one meets an imperative. And at this point the religious problem of the great notion of *shinjin* arises—there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that one can do. *Shinjin* arises as the result of “other-power.”

So *hōben*, Amida as *inconceivable* light, wisdom that is conceivable but which also transcends conceptualization, instills in one the sense of *on* which engenders an imperative to respond. And yet no response is fully adequate except, perhaps, to be truly grateful: sincerely, authentically, grateful for Amida, for *shinjin*, for the Pure Land. And yet, even at this deep dimension of human self-understanding, one is met with the inadequacy of one's response. In so far as one is responding, it is, of course, one's response, and to that extent is not *shinjin*.

Perhaps the point is that the grateful heart (*shin/kokoro*) is the heart in which *shinjin* arises, and the sense of gratefulness that preceded the arising of *shinjin* is not subsequently negated or transformed, but deepened by one's realization of truth and reality, when the gratefulness for what was hoped for, for what was not yet seen, becomes the gratefulness for what was to have been known and is now known.

Amida is as real, one might say, as the truth of one's gratefulness. And one should think that full enlightenment would bring with it no need to re-evaluate the case.